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Illustration by Gary NeillIf upgrading your computer is out of the question, you still have a lot of options to increase your pep. Here are some suggestions to try. Depending on your system, changing some simple software settings can lead to huge performance. Run virus scan: Your computer probably doesn't have a virus, but why not make sure? Schedule an antivirus program so that it will run a weekly scan in late-night hours to prevent your computer from running daily. Update power settings: By default, Windows sets batteries (that is, laptops) to a Balanced Power Plan profile. This setting strikes a nice compromise between performance and battery life; but if you leave your computer connected all the time, the battery life is irrelevant. You can improve your laptop's performance by using a higher-end power plan that Windows hides by default. To access it, click the battery icon in the system tray, and then select More power options. Select the drop-down menu next to Show additional plans and select High performance. Among other things, it will turn off options that put your computer to sleep, so when you leave your computer, you'll get a lot of restart time. To reduce system clutter, regularly prune installed programs in the Programs and Features control panel. Uninstall, uninstall, uninstall: There is no shame in installing many software on your computer. After all, Windows was designed to run thousands of thousands of applications on a familiar platform. The problem is that each program takes up space on your hard drive, and many take it upon themselves to open at startup, clogging the system's RAM when your computer is on, whether you're using the program or not. Visit the Programs and Features control panel to uninstall any program that you're not using. Stop using your iPod? Apple alone has six applications on our test computer. Monitor end-of-life toolbars and device drivers for products (such as printers, WWAN modems, cameras, keyboards, and mice). Click Remove to remove each of them. You may need to restart several times. Clear your hard disk: Having a lot of stuff on your hard disk is not a problem until the disk is full, and Windows needs to work overtime to find a spare bit here and there to save files. Windows Built-in Disk Cleanup shows how much hard disk space your computer is wasting and identifies the main culprits. Unload everything you can into external hard drives or other archival storage; then run disk cleanup to get rid of junk e-mail, such as temporary Internet files, old installers, and recycle bin To access disk cleanup, type disk cleanup in the Start menu and press Enter. Try ReadyBoost: If you have an older COMPUTER with very low RAM, you can trick your way into a small increase in speed using using which allows you to connect a USB thumb drive to your computer and use it instead of real RAM modules. To use this policy, you'll need a high-speed USB port and high-speed USB flash drive. If your drive is perfect for ReadyBoost, Windows will give you the option to turn it on when you connect it. When the AutoPlay window appears, select Speed up my system; then follow the instructions. Try new drivers: By conventional wisdom, you shouldn't install new drivers if there's nothing wrong with your PC, as it might mess up something that worked well before. Admittedly, this undesirable result may occur, but is much more likely to improve your computer's performance. To reduce the risk that your computer will be partitioned with a bum driver update, first create a system restore point to return to if something fails: On the Start menu, type Create restore point in the search box, and then click Create... in the window that opens. This will create a network of security that you have access to, whatever happens. The next stop of the driver update should be Windows Update. Click Check for Updates, and then click the text to select how many updates are available. Typically, Microsoft classifies driver updates as optional, so even if the Windows Update text indicates that you don't need any critical updates, you should still click the link. Check the box next to all updated drivers, and then click OK to install. Then visit the manufacturer's website that includes your computer and/or devices connected to it. Check your device support page to download all new drivers that appear. In most cases, you'll need to know the specific piece of hardware installed on your computer (check Windows Device Manager if you're not sure what the component model number is), and you should only download the necessary drivers. Install the new drivers as specified: usually this step involves running a simple executable file and then rebooting. Carefully check your system after each driver installation and perform additional system restore points if you're upgrading more than a few drivers. The biggest increase in performance occurs when updating BIOS, motherboard drivers, and graphics card drivers. To drop splash screens from your PC, go to App settings and uncheck the box next to Turn on the Splash screen. Kill splash screens: Splash screens don't swamp down your computer per se, but they insert a speed bump into your schedule when you start the program, and that extra time can add up. You can turn off many splash screens in app settings. Turning off splash screens may not make your app load much faster, but it can make you feel that way. Scouring startup programs: It's very likely that a staggering number of programs are your loads spam at the time of system startup without your knowledge. Let's cut 'em down. First, look at what's in the startup queue by typing msconfig in the Start menu search box. Click Click The Startup tab and you'll find a list of everything that loads during boot, probably including several programs (known examples include QuickTime and everything Adobe does) that clogs it up. Uncheck the box next to each program that you don't want your computer to load during boot. The free Solutio app speeds up startups by delaying the uploading of nonessential programs. Another option is Solutio, a free tool that performs the same operation on the basis of the crowd source. If you're not sure what some programs have on the msconfig screen, Solutio can probably tell you along with exactly how much time each of them costs you during startup. Catch: Solutio itself will slow you down in seconds, so install it only if you know that your system has a lot of items loading at startup so you can safely get rid of it. Turn off search indexing: The ability to search your computer at Google-like speed is one of the biggest windows 7 (and vista) strengths. But if you're organized, you may not be able to use it - and no matter how neatly you keep your business, indexing services will slow you down, sometimes very much. To change indexing settings, type services in the Start menu prompt, and then start the Services application. Scroll down and right-click Windows Search, and then select Properties. Then change the Startup type to Off, and then finish by clicking OK. In Personalization control panel, you can turn off system visual effects by switching to the main and high contrast theme. Clip Aero Wings: Windows desktop screen with transparent windows, alternating backgrounds and other traps really looks nice. However, these effects can significantly slow down your system. To turn them off, open the Personalization control panel and scroll down in the main window to Basic and high contrast themes. Windows 7 Basic theme is attractive, but it uses much less graphics rendering power. To make more detailed improvements, open The Performance Information and Tools control panel, and then click Adjust Visual Effects in the left pane. Here are two dozen specific settings that you can adjust to make your computer better; turn them off by clicking the Adjust button for best performance, and then click OK. Turn off Aero Preview by unchecking the box next to Use Aero Preview to view your desktop. Delete preview: Aero Review and Aero Snap consume a relatively small amount of system resources, but turning off Aero Snap will probably save you time by eliminating random instant moments that you need to undo manually. To access these features, type easily in the Start menu prompt, and then select Ease of Access Center. At the bottom of the screen, click Make it easier to focus on tasks. Insert a check box that says Don't arranged windows when they are moved to the edge of the screen to disable Aero Snap. While out there, consider checking the cell directly above Turn off all unnecessary animations (if possible) as another small timer. Iki Iki next to The Aero Summary, right-click the taskbar, and then select Properties. Then, uncheck Use Aero Preview to view your desktop. Kill Compression: If your hard drive is properly large, you don't have reason to compress folders on it that you regularly use. Extracting files to fly only slows down your access to them. To extract the compressed folder (without installing third-party compression software), right-click the folder and select Extract All. Follow the instructions to select a destination for uncompressed files; then delete the original compressed folder. Go without thumbnails: If you've ever tried to view thumbnail images in a folder that contains several hundred images, you've probably seen Windows choke on a task. To turn off thumbnailing, open Windows Explorer, and then click Tools, Folder Options. Click the View tab, and then select the check box for the first option: Always show icons, never show thumbnails. Consider registry cleaners: Registry cleaners are considered lifeguards for their proponents and snakes to oil their detractors, and neither side has shown any tendency to soften their position. We add to the argument only that registry cleaners may have some value for some users, and that we have seen a comprehensive registry scrub to revive the year-old computer, at least to some extent. (Of course, following other tips in this story helps, too.) Worth a try are the free CCleaner, PC Tools Registry Mechanic (\$30/year), and Iolo Technologies System Mechanic (\$40), but positive results are not guaranteed. Note: When you buy something by clicking on links in our articles, we can earn a small commission. For more information, please read our partner reference policy. Information.

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